

## WILLIAM BEAUMONT AS AN ARMY OFFICER\*

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Surgeon General of the Army

I appreciate the courtesy you have extended to me this evening by giving me an opportunity to assist in doing honor to the memory of this great military surgeon and scientist by recounting the history of his career as a Medical Officer of the Army, and to be accorded the privilege of listening to the remarks upon his scientific achievements which will be made by others this evening. Without further delay I will then proceed to speak upon "William Beaumont as an Army Officer".

William Beaumont came of a family which had rendered military service in many a campaign. His father, Samuel Beaumont, had been a corporal in the Connecticut Militia in the American Revolution, and his uncles had also served.

Born just two years after American independence had been achieved, he grew up amid stories of the war, and his mind was filled with a desire to wear the uniform. After his apprenticeship in medicine to Dr. Benjamin Chandler, he was licensed to practice in Vermont in 1812, just as the clouds of the second war with Great Britain began to gather. He immediately seized the opportunity to put his medical training into practice and at the same time display his patriotism. From his home in Champlain, New York, he crossed the lake of that name to Plattsburgh, where a portion of the Army of the North under General Dearborne was encamped, and presented his credentials, consisting of his license to practice medicine and certificates attesting his skill and his "strict moral honesty and integrity". On September 13, 1812, he was received into the Army as a Surgeon's Mate, a rank that corresponded to Assistant Surgeon or what would today be a First Lieutenant. He was assigned to the "Sixth Regiment of Infantry on brevet

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from General Bloomfield". He was commissioned officially by President Madison on December 2, 1812, and on the twelfth of that month transferred to the Sixteenth Infantry. During this period of the war, there was very little activity on the part of this force, so that on January 1, 1813, he suspended duty for a time and began the private practice of medicine in Plattsburgh. This was a not unusual procedure, and illustrates the casual manner in which the War of 1812 was waged and the lack of interest manifested in some quarters. While out of the service some of his friends, the Chandlers at St. Albans, whom he visited, sought to prevent his returning to the army. But the desire for the military life proved too strong, and with the prospects of early engagements with the enemy, he returned to the service, and was transferred again on February 15, 1813, to the Sixth Regiment of Infantry.

Within a few weeks orders were received by this regiment to march to Sacketts Harbor to embark for a point unknown. On March 10th he wrote to his friend Dr. Chandler, in part:

"We have this day received orders to repair to Sacketts Harbor with all possible dispatch. We start on Saturday next, expecting to join 8,000 at that place, where doubtless we shall have an obstinate battle . . . I am again in the U. S. Service. I have not time to state particular reasons, but honor and gratitude to the officers for the friendly assistance in procuring the appointment, together with their anxious solicitude for me to continue with them, was one cause of my resuming my former station."

His regiment arrived at Sacketts Harbor on March 27th, and on April 13th he again wrote to Dr. Chandler:

"The regular force at this place is not so great as common report would have it. There are about 5,000 soldiers, sailors, and marines, exclusive of the Second Brigade, which arrived a few days since in the adjacent Towns of Brownville and Watertown, eight or ten miles distance. The Jesus-stealer, or Old Rifle's regiment, has not yet come

on. General Chandler takes the command, no other being present; General Wilkinson is expected to take the command of the Northern Army, and Colonel Pike is promoted to brigadier-general. An attack on Kingston is pretty certain as soon as the lake opens. The troops are all very healthy. I have but three or four sick in my regiment; have lost none on the march, nor since we arrived, tho' our situation is miserable. We are encamped where the mud and water have been over shoe in every direction, in open huts, without any straw, or more than our blankets to cover us. No new or strange disease has occurred since I saw you. No peculiar treatment is required to save the men; the old Brunonian practice, a little varied and changed into the Chandlerian, succeeds almost to a miracle. I have no remarks worthy of communicating, having had no very singular cases. Yesterday we shot a soldier of the marine corps for desertion; we could not obtain the privilege of dissecting him. Next Thursday another is to be shot."

We are fortunate in having Beaumont's diary of the period of his service in the war of 1812, so that full information as to his movements is available. Here are two entries:

APRIL 27, 1813:

"27th. Sailed into harbor (Kingston) and came to anchor a little below the British Garrison. We now filled the boats and effected a landing, though not without some difficulty and the loss of some men. The British marched their troops from the Garrison down the (hill) to cut us off in landing, and then they had every advantage. They could not affect their (plan). A hot engagement ensued, in which the enemy lost nearly a third of their men and were soon compelled to quit the field, leaving their dead and wounded strewed in every direction. We lost but very few in the engagement. The enemy returned into Garrison, but from the loss sustained in the 1st engagement, the undaunted courage of our men, and the brisk firing from our fleet into the Garrison with 12- and 32-pounders, they

were soon obliged to evacuate it and retreat with all possible speed. Driven to this alternative, they devised the inhuman project of blowing up their Magazine (containing 300 Bbls. powder), the explosion of which, shocking to mention, had almost totally destroyed our Army. Above 300 were wounded, and almost 60 killed dead on the spot by stones of all dimensions falling like a shower of hail in the midst of our ranks. The enemy had about 20 killed and wounded by the explosion, tho the main body had retreated far out of the Garrison. After this sad disaster our Army marched into the Garrison, hawled down the British coat of arms (which they were too haughty to do), and raised the American Standard on its place. Our Army was about 1,500 strong—Theirs about the same. Encampt in Garrison this night, mounting a guard 500 strong to secure our safety through the night. A most distressing scene ensues in the Hospital—nothing but the Groans of the wounded and agonies of the Dying are to be heard. The Surgeons wading in blood, cutting off arms, legs, and trepanning heads to rescue their fellow creatures from untimely deaths. To hear the poor creatures crying, “Oh, Dear! Oh, Dear! Oh, my God, my God! Do, Doctor, Doctor! Do cut off my leg, my arm, my head to relieve me from misery! I can’t live, I can’t live!” would have rent the heart of steel, and shocked the sensibility of the most hardened assassin and the cruelest savage. It awoke my liveliest sympathy, and I cut and slashed for 48 hours without food or sleep. My God! Who can think of the shocking scene when his fellow-creatures lie mashed and mangled in every part, with a leg, an arm, a head, or a body ground in pieces, without having his very heart pained with the acutest sensibility and his blood chill in his veins. Then, who can behold it without agonizing sympathy!”

MAY 27TH, 1813:

“27th. Embarked at break of day. Col. Scott, with 800 men for the advance Guard, supported by the first Brigade, comd. by Genl. Boyd, moved in concert with the shipping to the enemy’s shore and landed under the enemy’s Battery

and in front of their fire, under cover of our shipping, with surprising success, not losing more than 30 men in the engagement, tho the enemy's whole force was placed in the most advantageous situation possible. Notwithstanding, we routed them from their mounted and chosen spot, and drove them out of the country. Took possession of the Town (Newark) and Garrison. Killed of the British, rising 100; wounded, rising 200; prisoners, 100."

The Colonel Scott mentioned by Beaumont was Winfield Scott, later to become commander-in-chief of the Army (1841) and distinguish himself in the Mexican War, and known affectionately to his men as "Old Fuss and Feathers".

In another pocket volume, Beaumont kept an account of his medical and surgical labors. He tells us that at Sacketts Harbor the "type of disease was Intermittant, in many cases complicated with Peripneumony", for which he prescribed that popular old remedy, tartar emetic. There were throughout the campaign many cases of "dysenteries and diarrhoeas" and some cases of "Typhus", or as we should say, typhoid fever.

During his service at this time Beaumont himself was stricken with illness and was for some time—how long we do not know—under treatment at Fort George.

In August, 1814, he took part in the battle of Plattsburgh under General Macomb—the Adjutant General of the Army who took the field—and who with 7,500 men and a fleet of fourteen vessels, defeated General George Prevost with 14,000 men and sixteen vessels. This victory at Plattsburgh Bay helped to turn the tide of battle in favor of the land forces. Macomb was promoted Major General. In commenting on the work of the medical officers during the battle, James Mann, medical director at Plattsburgh, laments the failure to give proper credit for the bravery of these officers under fire while attending the wounded. While, he said, he could not discriminate in his praise of these officers, he mentions Beaumont as one of five who "have deserved well of their government".

In December, 1814, the Treaty of Ghent ended the war, and Beaumont contemplated a return to civil life. With the reduction of the strength of the army to 10,000, it became necessary to drop many officers. But on the basis of merit Beaumont was retained in May, 1815 with the Sixth Infantry, though hundreds higher in rank and older in service were dropped.

Of Beaumont's personal courage there can be no question. He was nearly involved in a duel with Captain Richards of the Artillery Corps, and indeed sent Richards a challenge, but the matter was smoothed over by mutual friends without bloodshed.

Though he had been retained in the service, Beaumont decided to resign because of insufficient prospect of advancement. He entered private practice with Dr. G. Senter, another famous old army surgeon. But like many officers who have once come to love military life, he was not satisfied out of uniform. In 1818 the newly appointed Surgeon General Lovell, an old friend, offered him a clerkship in the Surgeon General's Office, but though he at first accepted he later declined, as the salary was but \$1000 per year. He did, however, accept a commission as Surgeon in the New York Militia on April 6, 1819, at the request of Governor Clinton, whom Beaumont as a staunch Federalist, greatly admired.

He again entered the regular army on March 18, 1820, being commissioned Surgeon by President Monroe, with rank from December 4, 1819. He was immediately ordered to Fort Mackinac on the northwestern frontier, where he reported once more to General Macomb, under whom he had served at Plattsburgh.

His diary gives an interesting account of his journey to his new station and a detailed description of the Fort. He took up his duties as a medical officer, looking after the small one-story frame hospital. Here it was that he was called in to treat the accidental gunshot wound of the young Alexis St. Martin, and his researches with this patient—

"that old fistulous Alexis", as Osler calls him, are known to every student of physiology. I shall not attempt an account of them here.

He felt greatly hampered in his work at Mackinac, for there was no one to consult as to his work, there being no doctor within the radius of several hundred miles, and of course nothing even remotely resembling what we would call "laboratory facilities". He probably asked for a transfer to some eastern post, for a letter to him from the Surgeon General's Office, dated February 2, 1825, informed him that he would be ordered to Ft. Niagara. But by May the order had been revoked as the contemplated troop movement had been cancelled, and he resolutely continued his work at Mackinac. In June, however, to his joy he was transferred to Ft. Niagara and there he continued his experiments. Obtaining a leave of absence in July, he took his patient to Burlington, Vermont, and to Plattsburgh to exhibit him to physicians there. Here it was that St. Martin took "French leave", leaving Beaumont broken-hearted over his loss.

Early in 1826 Beaumont was transferred, accompanying troops, to Green Bay, Michigan Territory, where he was called upon to perform the same type of duty as at Mackinac. Here he saw active service against hostile Indians under Chief Red Bird, and was present with Major Whistler when Red Bird surrendered. Beaumont's duties took him to Fort Howard, and later to Fort Crawford, both in Michigan Territory, taking station at the latter on August 10, 1826.

At Fort Crawford, Prairie du Chien, Upper Mississippi, Beaumont recommenced his studies of the truant St. Martin, whom he had located and brought at his own not inconsiderable expense, to his post. Beaumont had begun to receive recognition for his work, and in May, 1831 was given permission to visit Europe for a year for study. But before he could leave, the order was rescinded. The beginning of the Black Hawk War in that year was the probable cause for Beaumont's retention in the United States.

During this period he had not only further experience with Indian warfare, but also with a still more terrible enemy. A wide-spread epidemic of cholera broke out. Beaumont's studies of it were published. The Black Hawk War was often called the "cholera campaign".

In August, 1832, Colonel Zachary Taylor, then in command of Fort Crawford, acting on War Department authority, gave Beaumont leave of six months for the purpose of visiting Europe. After visiting his home Beaumont went to Washington where he abandoned any idea of going to Europe, thinking that the time that would be available in Europe on but a six months furlough would be insufficient to accomplish anything. He accordingly spent his furlough in America, at its expiration being ordered to New York City, later being sent to Plattsburgh for recruiting duty.

In December, 1832, a way was found to help hold the elusive St. Martin, who continued to "escape" from time to time despite his promises to Beaumont. He was enlisted as a sergeant in the army. But as we know, even this did not hold Alexis.

In January, 1834, Beaumont's station was transferred to Jefferson Barracks, some twelve miles below St. Louis, but later he was sent to St. Louis Arsenal, where he was permitted to live in the city and engage in private practice, which soon became large and lucrative. In 1836 Surgeon General Lovell, Beaumont's good friend and supporter, died, and his successor, Surgeon General Lawson, was less inclined to grant him special privileges. It was rumored that he was to be transferred to Jefferson Barracks again, with consequent inability to practice in St. Louis. His friends among officers of the line, including Major Robert E. Lee and Major Ethan Allen Hitchcock, praised his work highly as did also the Missouri senators.

It must be admitted that Beaumont was lacking in fact, and the forceful language that he did not hesitate to use, even when addressing the President of the United States,



did not help his cause. The blow finally fell. General Order No. 48, dated September 18, 1839, assigned him to a board of officers to convene on November 15th following at Fort Brooks, Florida. Beaumont sought at once to resign, and though at first his resignation was refused until he had complied with the order, it was at length accepted on January 20, 1840. Beaumont made the further mistake of seeking reinstatement by direct appeal to President Van Buren, and in his letter characterized the Surgeon General as one whose capacity was zero. His friends Hitchcock and Lee in vain tried to restrain him. His desire to reenter the army came to naught.

So ended the military career of one of the most noted medical officers who has worn our uniform. The remainder of his life was that of a private physician in St. Louis, where he died on April 25, 1853.

General Order No. 40, War Department, June 26, 1920, announced that "the new hospital constructed on the military reservation at El Paso, Texas, will be known as the 'William Beaumont General Hospital' in honor of Major William Beaumont, surgeon U. S. Army (born 1785; died 1853), who during his service as a medical officer of the Army conducted epoch-making investigations of the physiology of digestion, and, as a result of his researches became the leading physiologist of the country and the first to make an important and enduring contribution to that science".

A final word. Osler himself planned to secure St. Martin's stomach for the Army Medical Museum, but when that celebrated patient died in 1880, an old man and the father of twenty children, Osler received a telegram: "Don't come for autopsy; will be killed", and St. Martin's neighbors guarded his grave by night.

I have here photostat copies of the old one-story frame hospital at Fort Mackinac to which Alexis St. Martin was removed when wounded and where he lay during his convalescence; a picture of Fort Michillimackinac in mid-

winter showing one of the block houses with the surgeon's quarters and hospital to the left of it; a picture of Beaumont's first commission as a surgeon's mate signed by President James Madison December 2, 1812; and a picture of his commission as a post surgeon of the army, signed by James Madison, effective from December 4, 1819. I will pass these around among the audience. I thank you for your kind attention.

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### THE BEAUMONT-ST. MARTIN CONTRACT AND THE DESCENDANTS OF DR. BEAUMONT\*

HARRIS A. HOUGHTON  
(Chairman, Beaumont Celebration Committee)

Obviously, a most unique contract, from the viewpoints of both medicine and law, was that one which was entered into October 16, 1832, between William Beaumont, Surgeon in the Army of the United States of America, of the one part, and Alexis St. Martin, Laborer, of Berthier, Province of Lower Canada, of the other part. You will remember that St. Martin, who was in his late twenties, had justly earned the reputation of being a most undependable person, at least in Dr. Beaumont's estimation, and that this idea of having a contract was probably born of a desire on the part of the Doctor to produce a psychological effect on St. Martin's acquisitive and puerile mentality. Certainly, there was no way to enforce its terms on St. Martin, except in those measures which may have been provided by law for the punishment of run-away indentured servants.

In September, 1832, Beaumont returned to Plattsburgh from the west with his family. For once, Alexis promptly appeared from his Canadian home according to promise. The contract was drawn up and signed as stated, and the third series of experiments followed.

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